

Ambush at Kamikaze Pass

Tom Engelhardt

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CAPTAIN LUNDIGAN'S
THE KIND OF COMPANY
COMMANDER WHO'LL NEVER
ORDER HIS MEN INTO COMBAT...
HE LEADS THE WAY TO...

THE VICTORY

BUT THEN HE DISCOVERS HE'S NOT
AS HARDNOSED AS HE THOUGHT
HE WAS WHEN THE ENEMY IS
AT HIS MERCY!

Tom Engelhardt

"I was visiting an Indian school and a movie was being shown in the auditorium about the cavalry and the Indians. The cavalry was, of course, outnumbered and holding an impossible position where the Indians had chased them into the rocks. The Indians, attempting to sneak up on the cavalry, were being killed, one every shot. When it finally appeared that the Indians were going to overrun the army position the ubiquitous cavalry appeared on the far horizon with their bugle blowing, and charged to save the beleaguered few. The whole auditorium full of Indian students cheered." Our Brother's Keeper: The Indian in White America

"It was a thrilling drama of love and death they saw silently reeled off; the scenes, laid at the court of an oriental despot, galloped past, full of gorgeousness and naked bodies, thirst of power and raving religious self-abnegation, full of cruelty, appetite and deathly lust, and slowing down to give a full view of the muscular development of the executioner's arms. Constructed, in short, to cater to the innermost desires of an onlooking, international civilization."

Thomas Mann, Magic Mountain

"Westerns" may have been America's most versatile art form. For several generations of Americans, Westerns provided history lessons, entertainment and a general guide to the world. They created or recreated a flood of American heroes, filled popcorned weekends and overwhelmed untold imaginations. It's as difficult today to imagine movies without them as to think of a luncheonette without Coca Cola. In their folksy way, they intruded on our minds. Unobtrusively they lent us a hand in grinding a lens through which we could view the whole of the non-white world. Their images were powerful; their structure was satisfying; and at their heart lay one archetypal scene which went something like this:

White canvas-covered wagons roll forward in a column. White men, on their horses, ride easily up and down the lines of wagons. Their arms hang loosely near their guns. The walls of the buttes rise high on either side. Cakey streaks of yellow, rusty red, dried brown enclose the sun's heat boiling up on all sides. The dust settles on their

nostrils, they gag and look apprehensively towards the heights, hostile and distant. Who's there? Sullenly, they ride on.

Beyond the buttes, the wagon train moves centrally into the flatlands, like a spear pointed at the sunset. The wagons circle. Fires are built; guards set. From within this warm and secure circle, at the center of the plains, the white-men (-cameras) stare out. There, in the enveloping darkness, on the peripheries of human existence, at dawn or dusk, hooting and screeching, from nowhere, like maggots, swarming, naked, painted, burning and killing, for no reason, like animals, they would come! The men touch their gun handles and circle the wagons. From this strategically central position, with good cover, and better machines, today or tomorrow, or the morning after, they will simply mow them down. Wipe them out. Nothing human is involved. It's a matter of self-defense, no more. Extermination can be the only answer.



There are countless variations on this scene. Often the encircled wagon train is replaced by the surrounded fort; yet only the shape of the object has changed. The fort, like the wagon train, is the focus of the film. Its residents are made known to us. Familiarly, we take in the hate/respect struggle between the civilian scout and the garrison commander; the love relations between the commander's daughter and the young first lieutenant who-has-yet-to-prove-himself; the comic routines of the general soldiery. From this central point in our consciousness, they sally forth to victory against unknown besiegers with inexplicable customs, irrational desires, and an incomprehensible language (a mixture of pig-latin and pidgen Hollywood).

What does this sort of paradigm do to us? Mostly, it forces us to flip history on its head. It makes the intruder exchange places in our eyes with the intruded upon. (Who ever heard of a movie in which the Indians wake up one morning to find that, at the periphery of their existences, in their own country, there are new and aggressive beings ready to make war on them, incomprehensible, unwilling to



share, out to murder and kill etc.) It is the Indians, in these films, who must invade, intrude, break in upon the circle--a circle which contains all those whom the film has already certified as "human." No wonder the viewer identifies with those in the circle, not with the Indians left to patrol enigmatically the bluffs overlooking humanity. In essence, the viewer is forced behind the barrel of a repeating rifle and it is from that position, through its gun sights, that he receives a picture history of Western colonialism and imperialism. Little wonder that he feels no sympathy for the enemy as they fall before his withering fire--within this cinematic structure, the opportunity for such sympathy simply ceases to exist.

Such an approach not only transforms invasion into an act of self-defense; it also prepares its audiences for the acceptance of genocide. The theory is simple enough: We may not always be right (there are stupid commanders etc), but we are human. By any standards (offered in the film), "they" are not. What, then, are they? They are animate, thus they are, if not human, in

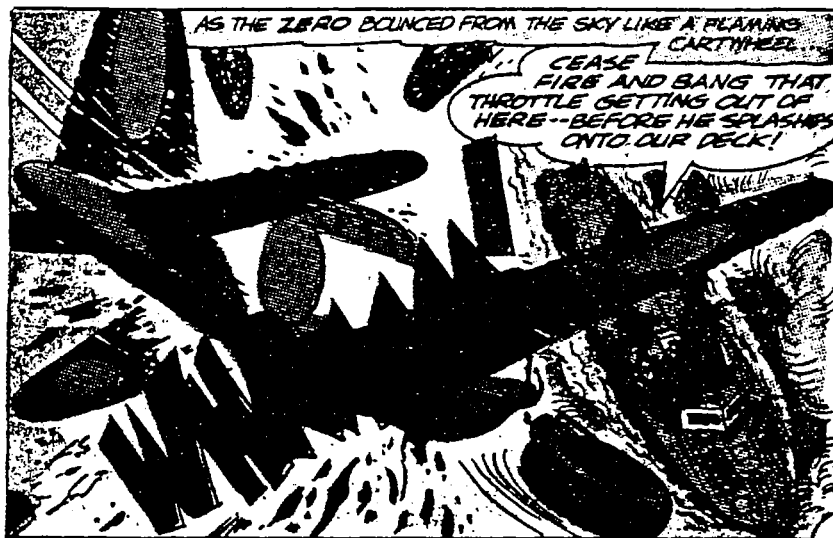


some sense animals. And, for animals facing a human onslaught, the options are limited. Certain of the least menacing among them can be retained as pets. As a hunter trains his dog, these can be trained to be scouts, tracking down those of their kind who try to escape or resist, to be porters, to be servants. Those not needed as pets (who are nonetheless domesticable) can be maintained on preserves. The rest, fit neither for house training nor for cages, must be wiped out.¹

From the acceptance of such a framework flows the ability to accept as pleasurable, a relief, satisfying, the mass slaughter of the "non-human"--the killing, mowing down of the non-white, hundreds to a film and normally in the scene which barely precedes the positive resolution of the relationships among the whites. Anyone who thinks the body count is a creation of the recent Indochinese war should look at the movies he saw as a kid. It was the implicit rule of those films that no less than ten Indian (Japanese, Chinese....) warriors should fall for each white, expendable secondary character.²

Just as the style and substance of the Indian wars was a prototype for many later American intrusions into the third world (particularly the campaigns in the Philippines and Indochina), so movies about those wars provided the prototype from which nearly every American movie about the third world derived. That these third world movies are pale reflections of the framework, outlook, and even conventions of the cowboy movie is easy enough to demonstrate. Just a few examples, chosen almost at random from the thirty or forty films I've caught on T.V. in the last few months. Pick your country: the Mexico of toothy

Pancho Villan bandits, the North Africa of encircled Foreign Legionnaires, the India of embattled British Lancers, or even South Africa. One would think treatment of South Africa might be rather special, have its own unique features. But Lo! We look up and already the Boers are trekking away, in (strange to say) wagons, and, yep, there's, no... let's see... Susan Hayward. Suddenly, from nowhere, the Zulus appear, hooting and howling, to surround the third-rate wagons of this third-rate movie. And here's that unique touch we've all been waiting for. It seems to be the singular quality of the Zulus that they have no horses and so must circle the wagon train on foot, yelling at the tops of their voices and brandishing their



spears...but wait...from the distance... it's the Transvaal cavalry to the rescue. As they swoop down, one of the Boers leaps on a wagon seat, waving his hat with joy, and calls to his friend in the cavalry, "You've got 'em running, Paul. Keep 'em running, Paul! Run 'em off the end of the earth! (Untamed, 1955)

Or switch to the Pacific. In any one of a hundred World War II flicks, we see a subtle variation on the same encirclement imagery. From the deck of our flagship, amidst the fleet corraled off the Okinawa coast, we look through

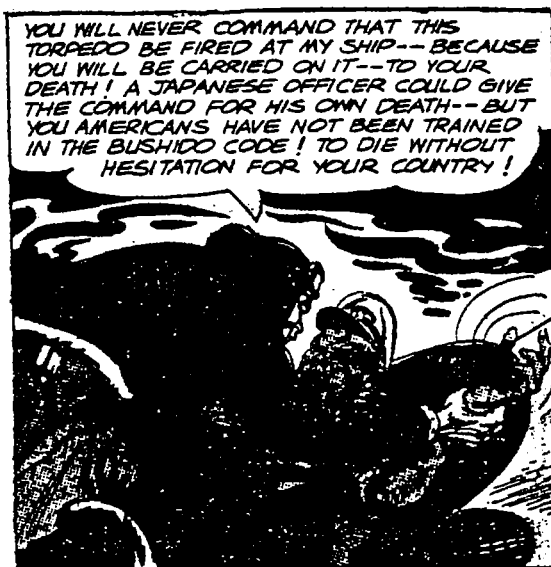
our binoculars. The horizon is empty; yet already the radar has picked them up. Somewhere beyond human sight, unidentified flying objects. The sirens are howling, the men pouring out of their bunks and helter-skelter into battle gear. At their guns, they look grimly towards the empty sky: the young ensign too eager for his first command, the swabby who got a date with that pretty Wave, the medic whose wife just sent him a "Dear John" letter (he's slated to die heroically). A speck on the horizon, faces tense, jokes fall away, it's the Kamikaze! Half-man, half-machine, an incomprehensible human torpedo bearing down from the peripheries of fanatical animate existence to pierce the armored defenses of the forces of Western democracy. The result? Serious damage to several ships, close calls on more, several secondary characters dead, and an incredible number of Japanese planes obliterated from the sky.³

That there is no feeling of loss at the obliteration of human torpedoes is hardly surprising. Even in those brief moments when you "meet" the enemy, movies like this make it immaculately clear that he is not only strange, barbarous, hostile and dangerous, but has little regard for his own life. Throwing himself on the gatling guns of the British with only spear in hand, or on the ack-ack guns of the Americans with only bomb in portal, he is not acting out of any human emotion. It is not a desire to defend his home, his friends, or his freedom. It has no rational (i.e. "human") explanation. It is not even "bravery" as we in the West know it (though similar acts by whites are portrayed heroically). Rather, it is something innate, fanatical, perverse--an inexplicable desire for death, disorder and destruction.

When the enemy speaks a little English, he often explains this himself. Take, for instance, the captured Japanese officer in Halls of Montezuma (1950). The plot is already far advanced. On an island in the Pacific, hours

before the big attack, Marines are pinned down by Japanese mortars whose position they cannot locate. Yet if they do not locate them, the attack will fail. The Japanese officer obstinately refuses to help them. Richard Widmark pleads with him, appealing to his life force. "You have a future--to rebuild Japan--to live for..." But the officer replies: "Captain, you seem to have forgotten, my people for centuries have thought not of living well but dying well. Have you not studied our Judo, our science...We always take the obvious and reverse it. Death is the basis of our strength." Suddenly a mortar shell explodes above the bunker. Everybody ducks. Rafters fall; dust billows; slowly the air clears; a shocked voice yells out: "My God, the Jap's committed Hari Kari!" Fortunately the idiot gave it all away. He reminded the Americans of the quirks in the non-white mind. As any schoolboy should have known, orientals think backwards. The Japs put their rockets on the front slope of the mountain, not the protected rear slopes as an American would have done. The attack, to the tune of the Marine Hymn, moves forward, preparing to wipe the Japs off the face of the island.

If, in print, such simple idiocy makes you laugh, it probably didn't



when you saw the film; nor is it in any way atypical of four decades of action films about Asia. The overwhelmingly present theme of the non-human-ness of the non-white prepares us to accept, without flinching, the extermination of our "enemies" (as John Wayne commented in *The Searchers*, 1956, there's "humans" and then there's "Comanches.") and just as surely it helped prepare the ideological way for the leveling and near-obliteration of three Asian areas in the course of three decades.

It is useful, in this light, to compare the cinematic treatment of the European front in World Wars I and II with that of the Pacific front. From *The Big Parade* (a silent film) on, a common and often moving convention of movies about the wars against Germany went something like this: The allied soldier finds himself caught in a fox-hole (trench, farmhouse etc.) with a wounded German soldier. He is about to shoot when the young, begrimed soldier holds up his hand in what is now the peace symbol, but at the time meant "Do you have a cigarette?" Though speaking different languages, they exchange family pictures and common memories.⁴

The scene is meant to attest to man's sense of humanity and brotherhood over and above war and national hatred. Until very recently, such a scene simply did not appear in movies about the Japanese front. Between the American and his non-white enemy, a bond transcending enmity was hardly even considered. Instead, an analogous scene went something like this: A group of Japanese, shot down in a withering crossfire, lie on the ground either dead or severely wounded. The American soldiers approach, less from humanitarian motives than because they hope to get prisoners and information.⁵ One of the Japanese, however, is just playing possum. As the American reaches down to give him water (first aid, a helping hand), he suddenly



pulls out a hand grenade (pistol, knife) and, with the look of a fanatic, tries to blow them all to smithereens. He is quickly dispatched. (see, for instance, *In Love and War*, 1956)

The theme of alien intruders descending on embattled humans and being obliterated from an earth they clearly are not entitled to is most straightforwardly put in Science Fiction movies; for monsters turn out to be little more than the metaphysical wing of the third world. These movies represent historically events which have taken place only in the Western imagination. Thus,



the themes of the cowboy (-third world) movie come through in a more primeval way. An overlay of fear replaces the suspense. Metaphorically, the world is the wagon train; the universe, the horizon. (or, alternately, the earth space-ship is the wagon train; an alien planet, the horizon.) From that horizon, somewhere at the peripheries of human existence, from the Arctic icecap (The Thing, 1951), the desert (Them, 1954), the distant past (The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms, 1954), the sky (War of the Worlds, 1953), at dawn or dusk, hooting and beeping come the invaders. Enveloping whole armies, they smash through human defenses, forcing the white representatives of the human race to fall back on their inner defense line (perhaps New York or Los Angeles). Imperiling the very heartland of civilized life, they provide only one option--destroy THEM before THEM can destroy us.

In this sort of a movie, the technical problems involved in presenting the extinction of a race for the enjoyment of an audience are simplified.⁶ Who would even think about saving the Pod People? (Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 1956)

Ordinarily the question of alternatives to elimination barely comes to mind. If it does, as in that prototype "modern" Sci-Fi film The Thing (James Arness of Matt Dillon fame played the monster), usually the man who wants to save Them, "talk to Them," is the bad mad scientist as opposed to the good, absent-minded scientist (who probably has the pretty daughter being wooed by the cub reporter).⁷

Unfortunately for American movie-makers, Asians and others could not simply be photographed with three heads, tentacles, and gelatinaceous bodies. Consequently, other conventions had to be developed (or appropriated) that would clearly differentiate them from "humanity" at large. The first of these was invisibility. In most movies about the third world, the non-whites provide nothing more than a backdrop for all-white drama--an element of exotic and unifying dread against which to play out the tensions and problems of the white world. Sometimes, even the locales seem none-too-distinguishable, not to speak of their black, brown, or yellow inhabitants. It is not surprising, for instance, that the Gable-Harlow movie Red Dust (1932), set on an Indochinese rubber plantation (Gable is the foreman), could be transported to Africa without loss two decades later as the Gable-Kelly Mogambo. It could as well have been set in Brazil on a coffee plantation, or in Nevada with Gable a rancher.

As George Orwell commented of North Africa in 1939,

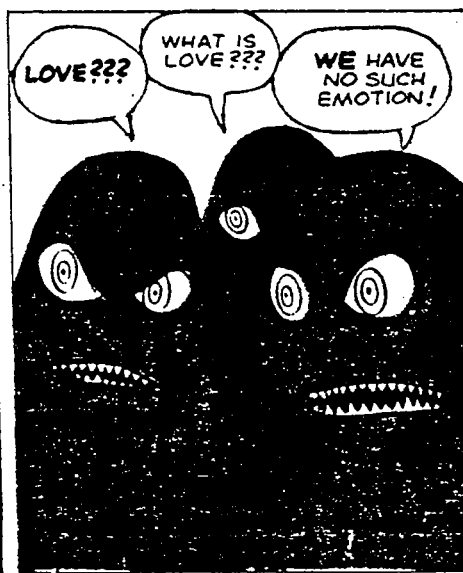
All people who work with their hands are partly invisible, and the more important the work they do, the less visible they are. Still, a white skin is always fairly conspicuous. In northern Europe, when you see a labourer ploughing a field, you probably give him a second glance. In a hot country, anywhere south of

*Gibraltar or east of Suez, the chances are that you don't even see him. I have noticed this again and again. In a tropical landscape one's eye takes in everything except the human beings. It takes in the dried-up soil, the prickly pear, the palm tree and the distant mountain, but it always misses the peasant hoeing at his patch. He is the same colour as the earth, and a great deal less interesting to look at. It is only because of this that the starved countries of Asia and Africa are accepted as tourist resorts.*⁸

Theoretically, it should have been somewhat more difficult since the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions and other uprisings of the oppressed and non-white around the world, to ignore the people for the scenery. Yet we can't fault Hollywood for its valiant attempt. Generally, American films have hewed with unsurpassed tenacity to this framework--reproducing the white world whole in the Orient, with Asians skittering at the edges of sets as servants or scenic menace (as in the recent horrific extravaganza, Krakatoa, East [sic.] of Java, 1969, where a volcano takes over the Lassie role and the Asian female pearl divers go under in the final explosions.) This is even more true in films on Africa, where for generations whites have fought off natives and lions,

not necessarily in that order.

A second convention of these films concerns the pecking order of white and non-white societies when they come into conflict. It is a "united front" among whites. Often the whites portrayed are the highly romanticized third-rate flotsam and jetsam of a mythologized American society--adventurers, prostitutes, opportunists, thieves (just as the films themselves, particularly when about Asia, tend to represent the brackish backwater of the American film industry.). Yet no matter how low, no matter what their internal squabbles, no matter what their hostilities towards each other, in relation to the third world the whites stand as one: Missionary's daughter and drunken ferryboat captain ("I hate the Reds," he says to her, "because they closed a lot of Chinese ports where they have dames. Chinese, Eurasian, and White Russian....Somebody pinned the bleeding heart of China on your sleeve but they never got around to me." / Blood Alley, 1955); soldier of fortune and adventurer-journalist, natural enemies over The Woman They Both Love (They escape Canton together, avoiding the clutches of the Reds in a stolen boat / Soldier of Fortune, 1955); sheriff, deputies and captured outlaws (They are surrounded by Mexican bandits / Bandalero, 196?); or on a national level, the British, Americans and Russians (They must deal with "the



chief enemy of the Western World," Mao Tse-tung / The Chairman, 1970). This theme is, of course, simply a variation on a more home-grown variety--the Confederates and Yankees who bury their sectional hatreds to unite against the Indians; the convicts on their way to prison who help the wagon train fight off the Sioux, bringing the women and children to safety etc. (See, for example, Ambush at Cimarron Pass, 1958, which combines everything in one laughable mess--a Yankee patrol and its prisoner team up with a Confederate rancher to fight off an Apache attack.)

The audience is expected to carry two racial lessons away from this sort of thing. The first is that the presence of the incomprehensible and non-human brings out what is "human" in every man. Individual dignity, equality, fraternity, all that on which the West theoretically places premium value, are brought sharply into focus at the expense of "alien" beings. The second is the implicit statement that, in a pinch, any white is a step up from the rest of the world. They may be murderers, rapists, and mother-snatchers, but they're ours.

When the inhabitants of these countries emerge from the ferns or mottled huts, and try to climb to the edges of the spotlight, they find the possibilities limited indeed. In this cinematic pick-up-sides, the whites already have two hands on the bat handle before the contest begins. The set hierarchy of roles is structured something like this: All roles of positive authority are reserved for white characters. Among the whites, the men stand triumphantly at the top; their women cringe, sigh and faint below; and the Asians are left to scramble for what's left, like beggars at a refuse heap.

There is only one category in which a non-white is likely to come

out top dog--villain. With their stock of fanatical speeches and their propensity for odd tortures, third world villains provided the American filmmaker with a handy receptacle for his audience's inchoate fears of the unknown and inhuman. Only as the repository for Evil could the non-white "triumph" in films. However, this is no small thing; for wherever there is a third world country, American scriptwriters have created villain slots to be filled by otherwise unemployable actors (though often even these roles are monopolized by whites in yellowface). From area to area, like spirits, their forms change: the Mexican bandit chief with his toothy smile, hearty false laugh, sombrero and bushy eyebrows (see, f.i., the excellent Treasure of the Sierra Madre, 1948, or the awful Bandalero); the Oriental warlord with his droopy mustache and shaven head (see The Left Hand of God, 1955, The General Died at Dawn, 1936, Shanghai Express, 1932, Seven Women, 1965, etc. ad nauseam); the Indian "Khan" or prince with his little goatee and urbane manner (Khyber Pass, 1954, Charge of the Light Brigade, 1936). Yet their essence remains the same.

Set against their shiny pates or silken voices, their hard eyes and twitching mouths, no white could look anything but good. In Left Hand of God, Humphrey Bogart, the pilot-turned-opportunist-warlord-advisor-turned-fraudulent-priest becomes a literal saint under the leer of Lee J. Cobb's General Yang. Gregory Peck, an "uninvolved" scientist-CIA spy, becomes a boy wonder and living representative of humanity when faced with a ping-pong playing Mao Tse-tung in The Chairman. How can you lose when the guy you want to double-deal represents a nation which has discovered an enzyme allowing pineapples to grow in Tibet and winter wheat in Mongolia, yet (as one of the Russian agents puts it) is holding it so that the rest of the "underdeveloped"

world, "90% poor, 90% peasant...will crawl on their hands and knees to Peking to get it." All in all, these non-white representatives of evil provide a backboard off which white Western values can bounce in, registering one more cinematic Score for Civilization.

The other group of roles open to non-whites are roles of helplessness and dependence. At the dingy bottom of the scale of dependence crouch children. Non-white children have traditionally been a favorite for screenwriters and directors. Ingrid Bergman helped them across the mountains to safety (The Inn of the Sixth Happiness, 1958); Deborah Kerr taught them geography (The King and I, 1956); Humphrey Bogart helped them to memorize "My Old Kentucky Home" (Left Hand of God); Carol Baker went with them on a great trek back to their homelands (Cheyenne Autumn, 1964); Richard Widmark took one (a little half-breed orphan girl--sort of the black, one-eyed Jew of the tiny tot's universe) back to the States with him (55 Days at Peking). And so on.

Essentially, non-white children fulfill the same function and have the same effect as non-white villains. They reflect to the white audience just another facet of their own humanity. Of course, if you ignore W.C. Fields, children have had a traditionally cloying place in American films; but in the third world movie they provide a particularly strong dose of knee-jerk sentiment, allowing the white leads to show the other side of Western civilization. It is their duty not just to exterminate the world's evil forces, but to give to those less capable (and more needy) than themselves. And who more closely fits such a description than the native child who may someday grow up to emulate us.

While it is children who demonstrate the natural impulses of the

white authorities towards those who do not resist them, but are helpless before them or dependent upon them, it is women who prove the point. Even within the cinematic reflection of the white world, women have seldom held exalted positions. Normally they are daughters of missionaries, sweethearts of adventurers, daughters, nurses, daughters of missionaries, wives on safari, schoolmarm, daughters of missionaries, or prostitutes. (The exceptions usually being when women come under a "united front" ruling--that is, they confront Asian men, not white men. Then, as with Anna in The King and I, while their occupations may not change they face society on a somewhat different footing.) Several rungs down the social ladder, non-white women are left mainly with roles as bargirls, geishas, belly dancers, nurse's aids, missionary converts, harem girls, prostitutes. In such positions, their significance and status depends totally on the generosity (or lack of generosity) of those white men around whom the movies revolve.

However "well-intentioned" the moviemaker, the basic effect of this debased dependency is not changeable. Take that classic schmaltz of the 1950's, The World of Suzie Wong.



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however, barely covers over the basic lesson of the movie: a helpless, charming Chinese bargirl can be saved by the right white man, purified by association with him, and elevated to dependency on him. (Her bastard child, conveniently brought out for his pity quotient, is also conveniently bumped off by a flash flood, avoiding further knotty problems for the already overtaxed sensibilities of the scriptwriters.) It all comes across as part act of God, part act of white America.

Moving upwards towards a peak of third world success and white condescension, we discover the role of "sidekick." Indispensable to the sidekick is his uncanny ability to sacrifice his life for his white companion at just the right moment. In this, he must leave the audience feeling that he has repaid the white man something intangible that was owed to him. And, in this, we find the last major characteristic of third world roles--expendability. Several classic scenes come to mind. In this skill, the otherwise pitiful Gunga Din excelled (Gunga Din, 1939). Up there on a craggy ledge, already dying, yet blowing that bugle like crazy to save the British troops from ambush by the fanatic Kali-worshippers. Or, just to bring up another third world group, the death of the black trainer in Body and Soul (1947), preventing his white World Heavyweight Champion (John Garfield) from throwing the big fight. Or even, if I remember rightly, Sidney Poitier, Mau Mau initiate, falling on the Punji sticks to save the white child of his boyhood friend Rock Hudson (Something of Value, 1957). The parts blend into each other: the Filipino guide to the American guerillas, the Indian pal of the white scout, that Mexican guy with the big gut and sly sense of humor. In the end, third world characters are considered expendable by both moviemakers and their audiences because they are no more a

William Holden, a dissatisfied architect-businessman, has taken a year's sabbatical in Hong Kong to find out if he can "make it" as an artist. (It could have been Los Angeles, but then the movie would have been a total zilch.) He meets ***Susie Wong***, a bargirl who is cute as a Walt Disney button and speaks English with an endearing "Chinese" accent. ("Fo' goo'niss sakes" she says over and over at inappropriate moments.) He wants her to be his model. She wants to be his "permanent girlfriend." Many traumas later, the moviemakers trundle out their good intentions towards the world's ill-treated masses. They allow Holden to choose Susie over Kay, the proper, American, upper class woman who is also chasing him. This attempt to put down the upper classes for their prejudices towards Chinese and bargirls,

source of "light" than the moon at night. All are there but to reflect in differing mirrors aspects of white humanity.

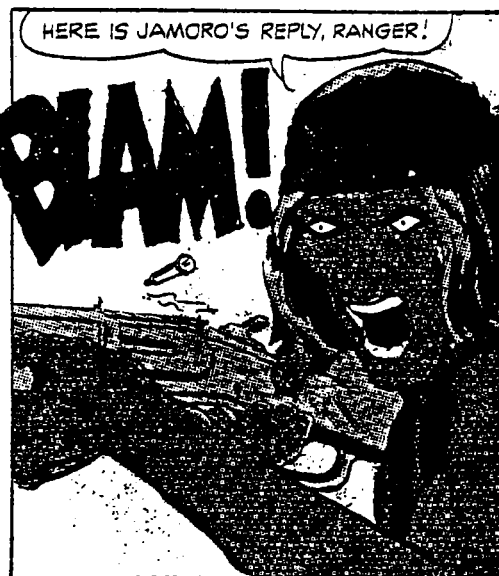
While extermination, dependency and expendability have been the steady diet of these movies over the decades, American moviemakers have not remained totally stagnant in their treatment of the third world and its inhabitants. They have over the last forty years, emerged ponderously from a colonial world into a neo-colonial one. In the 1930's, the only decade when anything other than second-rate films were made about Asia, moviemakers had no hesitation about expressing an outright contempt for subjugated and/or powerless Asians; nor did they feel self-conscious about proudly portraying the colonial style in which most Westerners in Asia lived. The train in Shanghai Express (1932) is shown in all its "colonial" glory: the Chinese passengers crammed into crude compartments; the Westerners eating dinner in their spacious and elegant dining room. Here was the striking contrast between the rulers and the ruled and nobody saw any reason to hide it.

During this period, with the European imperial structure in Asia still unbroken, colonial paternalism abounded. No one blinked an eye when Shirley Temple asked her Grandfather, the British Colonel (Wee Willie Winkie, 1937), why he was mad at "Khoda Khan," leader of the warlike tribes on India's northeast border; and he replied, "We're not mad at Khoda Khan. England wants to be friends with all her peoples. But if we don't shoot him, he'll shoot us...(they've been plundering for so many years) they don't realize they'd be better off planting crops." [a few poppy seeds maybe?] Nor were audiences taken aback when Cary Grant called his Indian sidekick a "beastie" (or alternately the "regimental beastie") in Gunga Din; nor when Clark Gable kicked his Indochinese workers out of a ditch (to save them from a storm,

of course), calling them similar names (Red Dust).

A decade later such scenes and lines would have been gaffes.⁹ In the wake of the World War and its flock of anti-Japanese propaganda flicks (whose progeny were still alive in the early 1960's), the destruction of the British, French and Dutch empires, the success of the Communist revolution in China, the birth and death of dreaded "neutrality," and the rise of the United States to a position of preeminence in the world, new cinematic surfaces were developed to fit over old frames. In their new suits, during the decade of the 50's, cowboy-third world movies flourished as never before. A vast quantity of these low-budget (and not-so-low-budget) films burst from Hollywood to flood the country's theatres. In the more "progressive" of them, an India in chains was replaced by a struggling, almost "independent" country; the "regimental beastie" by a Nehru (-Ghandi) type "rebel" leader; the Kali-worshipping, loin-clothed fanatic by Darvee, the Maoist revolutionary ("You cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs."). Yet this sort of exercise was no more than sleight of hand. The Nehru character looked just as ridiculously pompous and imitative as did Gunga Din when he practised his bugle; nor did the whites any less monopolize center stage (holding, naturally, the key military and police positions); nor could the half-breed woman (Ava Gardner) any less choose light (the British officer) over darkness (Darvee and his minions). Soon, all this comes to seem about as basic a change in older forms as was the "independence" granted to many former colonies in the real world (Bhowani Junction, 1956).

If any new elements were to enter these movies in the 1950's (and early 60's), it was in the form of changes in relations within the white world, not between the white and non-white worlds. These changes, heralded by



the "adult westerns" of the late fifties, have yet to be fully felt in films on Asia; yet a certain early (and somewhat aborted) move in this direction could be seen in some of the films that appeared about the Korean war (not a particularly popular subject, as might be imagined)--a certain tiredness ("Three world wars in one lifetime" / Battle Circus, 1953) and some doubts. The WWII flick's faith in the war against the "Japs", in a "civilian" army, and in "democracy" comes across tarnished and tired. The "professional" soldier (or flyer) takes center stage. ("We've gotta do a clean, professional job on those [North Korean] bridges." / The Bridges at Toko-ri, 1954). There is, for instance, no analogue in your WWII movies to the following conversation in The Bridges at Toko-ri. Mickey Rooney (a helicopter rescue pilot) and William Holden (a flyer) are trapped (shot down) behind the North Korean lines. Surrounded, they wait in a ditch for help to arrive. During a lull in the shooting, they begin to talk:

Holden: "I'm a lawyer from Denver, Colorado, Mike. I probably couldn't hit a thing [with this gun]... "

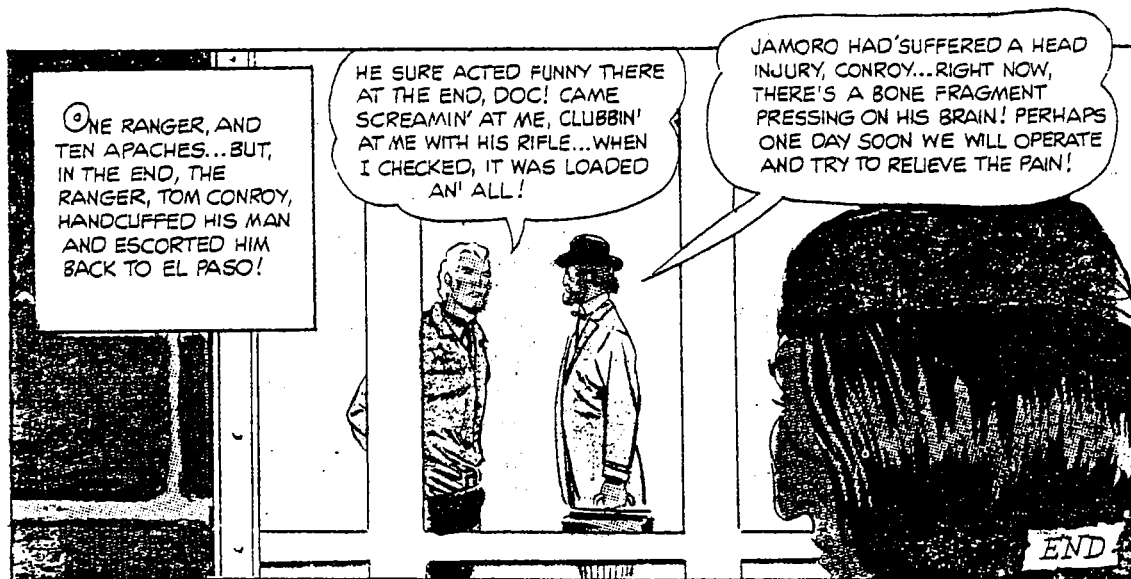
Rooney: "Judas, how'd you ever get out here in a smelly ditch in Korea?"

Holden: "That's just what I've been asking myself...the wrong war in the wrong place and that's the one you're stuck with...You fight simply because you are here."

Within minutes, they are both killed by the advancing Korean soldiers.

Yet though the white world might seem tarnished, its heroes bitter, tired and ridden with doubts, its relationship to the non-white world had scarcely changed. If anything, the introduction of massive air power to Asian warfare had only further reduced the tangential humanity of Asian peoples. For in a movie like Toko-ri (as at Danang today), you never even needed to see the enemy, only charred bodies.

This attempt, particularly in westerns, to introduce new attitudes in the white world, increasingly muddled the divisions between stock characters, brought to the fore the hero-as-cynic, and called into question the "humanity" of the whites vis-a-vis each other. Such adjustments in a



relatively constant cinematic structure represented an attempt to update a form which the world's reality put in increasing danger of unbelievability. By the early 1960's, the "adult western" had reached a new stage--that of elegy (see, for instance, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence, 1962). Superficially, such movies seem to be in a state of sentimental mourning for the closing of the frontier and the end of a mythical white frontier life. However, westerns as a form were originally created amidst industrial America partially to mourn just such a loss. The elegiac western of the 60's was, in fact, mourning the passing of itself. Today, this form has come to what may be its terminal fruition in America, the "hip" western--Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969), which is a parody not of the western, but of the elegiac western, since not even that can be taken totally straight any more.¹⁰

However, even in this extension of the western, one thing has not changed--attitudes towards the third world. When, for instance, Butch and Sundance cannot make a go of it in a hemmed in West, they naturally move on, "invading" Bolivia. In Bolivia, of course, it's the same old local color scene again, with one varia-

tion: instead of the two of them killing off hundreds of Bolivians in that old wagon train scene, hundreds of unidentified Bolivians band together to kill them. It all boils down to the same thing.

Whatever Butch Cassidy may be the end of, I think we stand at the edge of a not totally new, but nonetheless yawning abyss--the "sympathetic" film. The first of what I expect will be an onslaught of these are appearing now. They have at least pretensions towards changing how we see relationships not only within the white world itself, but between the white and Indian worlds. And what is appearing in westerns today may be the transmuted meat of Asian or African films within the next decade.

The recent A Man Named Horse (1970?) is a good example. It seems to have been a sincere and painstaking attempt to make a large-scale, commercially successful movie about the Sioux (before they were overrun by the whites), to show from an Indian point of view their way of life, their rituals (recreated from Catlin's paintings) and beliefs, their feelings and fears. Yet, at every turn, the film betrays the edges of older and more familiar frameworks.



movie seems to prove that old adage, "put a white man among even the best of savages and you have a natural chief." (He kills enemy Indians, goes through the sun initiation ritual, marries the chief's daughter, teaches the tribe British infantry tactics, and, in the end, his wife and adopted mother being dead, he splits for the white world.)

His girlfriend has that Ali McGraw look which probably is supposed to allow the audience to "identify" better with the Indians, but looks about as fitting as it did among the Jews of New Jersey (Goodby Columbus). Even a stab at righting the wrongs westerns have done to language has a similarly dismal result. The movie's makers, reacting to the common use of pidgen-Hollywood by Indian characters in normal westerns, allow the Sioux in this movie to speak their own language. As all but two of the characters are Sioux, much of the movie is conducted in the Sioux language. If this were a French movie, there would naturally be subtitles; but as these are Sioux *au naturel*, and as there is already a conveniently English-speaking character, an alternate means is called upon. Another "prisoner" is created, an Indian who spent some time with the French and speaks broken English. At the behest of the English Lord, he translates what is necessary to his and our understanding. In this way, the Indians, while retaining the dignity of their own language, are perhaps slightly less able to express themselves comprehensibly in this picture than in a normal western. More important, just as if it were the normal wagon train scenario, it forces us to see everything through white eyes.¹¹

And as long as the eyes through which we see the world do not change, so long as the old frameworks for movies about the third world are not thrown away, "intentions" go for little indeed. It is hard even to think of

It concerns an English Lord hunting in the American West early in the 19th century. Captured by a Sioux raiding party, he is brought back to their village (where the rest of the film takes place). There he becomes a slave (horse) for an Indian woman (Dame Judith Anderson). Already a white "hero" has been slipped into this movie about Indians, betraying an assumption that American audiences could not sustain interest in a film without whites. Given the way we look at these films, he immediately becomes the center of our attention; thus, in the end, you are forced to relate to the Sioux village through his eyes; and to relate to the Sioux as they relate to him (aiding him or mistreating him). Second, by following the travails of this Lord-turned-beast of burden as he assimilates to the tribe, the

examples of films where sympathetic intentions are matched by deeds. Certainly one would have to venture beyond the bounds of the U.S. to find them--perhaps The Battle of Algiers (which, in reverse, does for the French colonizers what we were never willing to do for the Indians). Its view begins at least to accord with the brutal history of the third world; to tell a little what it means, from the colonized point of view, to resist, to fight back, to rebel against your occupiers.

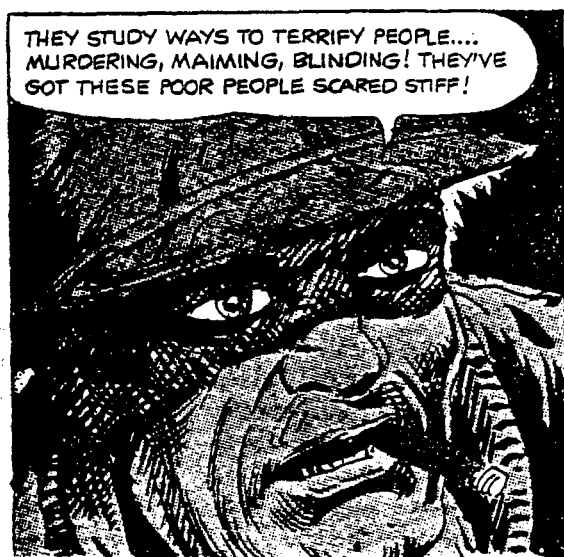
American moviemakers, however, are at heart still in love with an era when people could accept the six year old Shirley Temple telling Khoda Khan not to make war on the British because "the Queen wants to protect her people and make them rich." Their main substitution in later movies being to replace the Queen with (American) technology--machine guns to mow em down, and band-aids to patch em up. This mood is best captured by Gene Tierney in The Left Hand of God when Humphrey Bogart says, "China's becoming a nightmare, Anne...What are we really doing here?...We belong back in the States, marrying, raising a family." She replies, "...There's too much work to do here...the things we're doing here are what they need; whether medicine or grace. And we can give it to them..." Of course, the historical joke of this being uttered in China's Sinkiang province in 1947, a time when the unmentioned communist revolution is sweeping through the central provinces, passed the scriptwriters by. Yet, on the whole, just this distance between the film's "message" and Chinese reality about sums up the American approach to the third world. In the end, no matter where the moviemakers may think their sympathy lies, their films are



usually no more than embroideries on a hagiography of "pacification."

Within such a context, there is no possibility for presenting resistance, rebellion, or revolution by the intruded upon in a way that could be even comprehensible, no less sympathetic. Quite the opposite, the moviemakers are usually hell-bent on glorifying those Asians (or other third worlders) who allied with the Western invaders, not those who at some point resisted either the invasion or its consequences. However, there is an insoluble contradiction here. The method for judging non-whites in these films is based on how dependent or independent they are of the white leads and the white world. To the degree to which they are dependent, they are seen as closer to humanity. To the degree to which they are independent (i.e. resist) they are seen as less liable to humanization or outrightly inhuman and thus open to extermination. ("Mitchell, we must stamp this out immediately." / Gunga Din). In other words, there is an inherent bias in these movies towards the glorification of those "natives" who have allied with us. Yet what makes the white hero so appealing is the audience's feeling





that no matter how low he sinks, he retains some sense of human dignity. There is always that feeling (as Bogart and countless cowboy stars brought out so well) that despite appearances, *he is his own man*. Yet no movie Asians linked to the West can ever really be that. Though they can bask in the light of humanity, they can never be much more than imitation humans. In only one non-white role is this possibility open--that is the role of villain (he who refuses white help and actively opposes him). Only the villain, already placed outside the pale (sic) of humanity, can be his own man.

The result is a knotty problem. If those close to the whites are invariably dependent, they cannot but be viewed in some way with contempt, no matter how the movie makers go about trying to glorify them. On the other hand, if those most contemptible non-humans, the villains, are the only Asians capable of "independence" in these films, they are also the only Asians who are the cinematic equivalents of the white leads. Thus, we cannot help but have a sneaking respect for those who oppose us and a sneaking contempt for those who side with us. (How similar this is to the attitudes of many American soldiers in Vietnam towards ARVN and towards the NLF forces) No doubt this is at least partly responsible for the extremes American moviemakers have gone to in glorifying one and despoiling the other.

What Lewis and Clark's Indian guide Sacajawea was to American history high school texts, Gunga Din was to third world movies. He makes the classic sacrifice for the white world, and in death theoretically proves he is a "better man" than his British mentors. Yet how hollow this "triumph" is for the viewing audience. No one is fooled by the words. Doing his mimic marching shuffle, around the corner from the practicing British troops, what a pitiful imitation "human" he appears to be. And even his greatest hopes--to get one toe on the lowest rung of the white regimental ladder as company bugler--

leave him second best to any white who comes along. On the other hand, the leader of the Kali worshippers (read: native resistance forces) is portrayed in a paroxysm of caricature ("Rise brothers and kill...kill for the love of Kali, kill for the love of killing, KILL, KILL, KILL!"). He is a mad murderer, a torturer, a loin-clothed savage, a megalomaniac with bulging eyes. Yet he is the only Indian in the film who has the real ability to "love his country" like a white man. "I can die as readily for my country and my fate as you for yours," he says and voluntarily jumps into the snakepit, yelling "India farewell!"

This inability, despite pulling all the stops, to deny the enemy a certain dignity is not extraordinary. Even Mao Tse-tung, in the otherwise rabid The Chairman proves in some grim sense, irrepressible. On the other hand, no matter how charmingly portrayed, our allies' dependency cannot be totally overcome. They are always, in a way, trained spies in the camp of their own people.

American movies about the third world should not be given more credit than is their due. Despite the impression you might get in the theatre, American moviemakers did not invent the world, nor even the version of

world history they present in their films. However, they must be given full credit for developing a highly successful and satisfying cinematic form to encapsulate an existing ideological message. With this form, they have been able to relegate the great horrors of Western expansion into the rest of the world, and present-day American hegemony: over great hunks of it, to another universe of pleasure and enjoyment. They have successfully tied extermination of non-white peoples to laughable relief, and white racial superiority to the natural order of things. They have destroyed any possibility for explaining the various ways in which non-white (not to speak of white) people could resist invasion, colonization, exploitation, and even mass slaughter.

Cowboy (-third world) films are, in the end, a vast visual pacification program, ostensibly describing the rest of the world, but in fact aimed at the millions of people who for several generations have made up the American viewing audience. It's hardly a wonder that Vietnam did not sear the American consciousness. Why should it have? For years, Americans had been watching the whole scene on their screens: REV DEV, WHAM, endless My Lai's, body counts, killing of wounded enemy soldiers, aerial obliteration, etc. We had grown used to seeing it, and thrilling with



pleasure while reaching for another handful of popcorn.

Such a "pacification" program is based on the inundation principle. It is not a matter of quality (probably there have been no good films on Asia since the 1930's), but quantity. So many cowboy-third world movies have rolled factory-style off the production line that the most minute change of plot is hailed as a great innovation. In the end, all the visual "choices" available to a viewer just emphasize the way in which America is strikingly a one-channel country. In fact, it might not be too far wrong to say that while pacification may have failed in Vietnam, its pilot project here in America has generally succeeded; that we are a pacified population, living unknowingly in an occupied country.

FOOTNOTES

1. The men who historically advocated or pursued such a policy in the American West openly and unashamedly referred to it at the time as an "extermination" policy.

2. One must at least credit John Ford, the director, with keeping the carnage down in several of his films (for example, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, 1949) and with for allowing the Indians (Fort Apache, 1948) to emerge victorious, if no more comprehensible, from at least one movie in the history of the western film.

3. The land equivalent of the Kamikaze onslaught is the Banzai! charge (as in Fuller's Merrill's Marauders, 1962).

4. While somewhat harder to find in Nazi war flicks, see The Enemy Below (1957) for the World War II (and naval version) of the same scene. The last shot is of the opposing American and Nazi commanders who have disabled each other's ships and saved each other's lives, standing at the stern, sharing a cigarette and looking out together over the endless sea.



5. This is not to say that Americans are portrayed as lacking generosity. Quite the opposite, humanitarian gestures are second nature to them; however, those gestures tend to be directed towards humans. As in the scene where Merrill's Marauders, having smashed thru a mass of Japs, are confronted with a wounded comrade. "You wouldn't leave me?" he asks. "We never leave anybody," is the reply.

6. Extermination has, however, been spoken of quite bluntly in certain third world movies. This was particularly true of those movies made during the war against Japan. Take, for example, The Purple Heart (1944), about Japanese attempts to try the Doolittle flyers for "war crimes." At the trial, the leader of the American flyers tells the Japanese judge: "We'll come by night and we'll come by day. We'll blacken your skies and burn your cities to the ground until you get down on your knees and beg for mercy...This was your war. You asked for it. You started it...and now we won't stop until your crummy little empire is wiped off the face of the earth." The Japanese chief prosecutor immediately commits Hara-kiri because of loss of face in failing to break the American prisoners. Or again, Objective Burma (1945): the American journalist

sees tortured and dead American prisoners. In anger, he says, "This was done in cold blood by a people who claim to be civilized...stinking little savages. Wipe em out. Wipe em off the face of the earth, I say. Wipe em off the face of the earth!"

7. Of all the forms discussed, only Science Fiction films exhibit certain themes which run against this grain. It seems to me there are two sources for this opening towards "deviation." First, in the particularly chilly years of the fifties, anti-nuclear, anti-military freaks flocked to this form whose very fantastical nature provided an allegorical legitimacy for their questionable messages. Thus, even the monster-eradication movies often hide a plea for "peace"/deliverance from incompetent military defenders and their nuclear disasters, whose by-products are sci-fi's ubiquitous radioactive creatures. Second, a traditional tie-in with the sky, heaven, and God led to a semi-religious counter-theme of "divine intervention" and human (implicitly white) inferiority. This conception of wisdom descending from above to straighten out the stupid problems of blundering, incapable humanity is basic to The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951), in which "Klaatu" appears from space to tour Washington and plead for nuclear peace (and a fascist robot-police force to patrol the world); or The Next Voice You Hear (1950), in which God intervenes in person--via radio.

8. George Orwell, "Marrakech," in Essays (Doubleday, 1954), pp. 189-190.

9. There were, of course, some holdovers from the 30's. Particularly junk like Khyber Pass (1954), in which British lancer Richard Egan, getting ready to capture rebel leaders in a village, tells a fellow officer: "I don't want any of those devils to escape us."

10. Even John Wayne, the last of the cowboy superstars still in the saddle, is forced to mourn his own passing in True Grit (1968?).

11. For another recent example, see Tell Them Willie Boy is Coming (1970); and I feel certain (though I

have yet to see it) that Soldier Blue (1970) will fall in the same general category.

As for the newness of "sympathetic" films--at least a couple of historical antecedents come to mind: first, The General Died at Dawn (1936) with Gary Cooper, and Akim Tamiroff as the warlord Yang (seems to have been a pretty popular name among warlord's mothers). This Clifford Odets script hangs heavy with the hand of the 30's Left. ("You ask me why I'm for oppressed people, because I have a background of oppression myself.") But despite its professed sympathy for the oppressed people of China, its protestations of Asian dignity and love for life, and its unbelievably murky politics, it is loaded with all the normal stuff: white-centeredness ("Mr. O'Hara, from the time you leave this room until you deliver the money, the fate of China is in your hands."); a Chinese super-evil villain; and a mass suicide scene that only could have taken place among those for whom human life meant nothing



at all (In the movie's climactic scene, General Yang--who is dying at dawn--has his troops line up in two facing lines several feet apart and shoot each other), to name just a few of the more salient points.

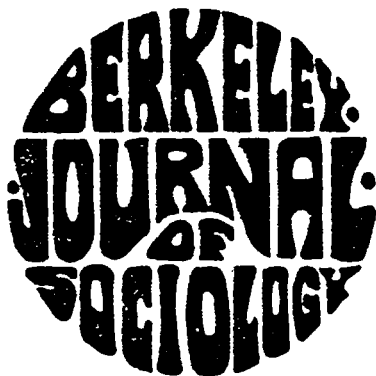
For an example from the earlier 60's, see John Ford's "bow" to the tribulations of the Indians, Cheyenne Autumn (1964). Exactly the same sort of process occurs and a good book by Marie Sandoz, written from the viewpoint of the Cheyenne, is destroyed in the bargain. Even its historical ending is twisted to imply that Secretary of the Interior Schultz (Edward G. Robinson) allowed the remnants of the Cheyenne to return to their homeland--which he most definitely did not.

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